

Kennedy Assassination

Two years after publication of the Warren Commission's Report on the assassination of President Kennedy, a spate of books and articles has raised serious questions about the validity of the commission's conclusions, and more than one critic has pressed for a second investigation. Last week, all this criticism evoked a first official response, however indirect. The Justice Department announced that the Kennedy family has deposited in the National Archives some 65 photographs (both color and black and white) and X rays of President Kennedy's body, all made during the autopsy that was performed at Bethesda Naval Hospital on the evening of the assassination. These photographs and X rays had been under the control of the Kennedy family, and they remain so, in that access to them will for the time being apparently be permitted only to official federal investigative agencies. Before long, however, there may be access as well by private individuals or organizations, with the specific consent of the Kennedy family.

For its own part, the Justice Department has deposited in the Archives all the physical evidence considered by the Warren Commission, such as Oswald's rifle, a nearly whole bullet which the commission thought went through both President Kennedy and Governor John B. Connally of Texas, bullet fragments, the President's clothing. There are already at the National Archives, and available for study, most of the investigative reports and working papers of the Warren Commission, although some reports remain classified and are not open to private persons. The materials deposited last week will thus virtually complete the holdings at the Archives, and constitute, in their way, an invitation to analysis and further investigation.

A spokesman for the Justice Department indicated that the deposits had been made in response to the recent criticism of the commission, and one may thus, perhaps, perceive a glimmer of official readiness, if not to reopen the investigation, at least to cooperate with a fresh inquiry.

The dramatic deposit of the photographs and X rays is unquestionably a wise and valuable move. The Warren Commission did not examine them, relying instead on the testimony of the doctors who performed the autopsy. Recent literature raises a question about the location of the first wound suffered by President Kennedy, which the commission located in his back, at the base of the neck. It has been suggested that the wound may have been lower than that, in which event the bullet that came in through it could not have made an exit, as the commission found, through the President's throat, and could not have then gone on also to wound Governor Connally.

The photographs will most probably clear up the point beyond doubt. It is of course barely possible that they may show that the wound was indeed lower than the commission reported. If so, that would be a discovery of the first importance, strongly – but not conclusively – supporting the hypothesis of a second assassin. But it is quite unlikely that the autopsy doctor on whom the commission relies, made such an elementary error in their report, or that they were part of some sort of a conspiracy to suppress the truth, and is therefore most probable that the photographs will confirm the commission's report on the location of the President's first wound of entry. In that case, a relatively minor question about the validity of its finding and the quality of its work will have been cleared up. But other serious doubts about its explanation of the Kennedy assassination will remain, and the possibility – although no more than the possibility – of a second assassin will not have been excluded.